

# Why are menstruating women in India removing their wombs?

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A lot of stigma surrounds periods in India

## **Two pieces of very disturbing news involving working women and menstruation have emerged in India in recent months.**

Periods have long been a taboo in the country, menstruating women are believed to be impure and are still excluded from social and religious events. In recent years, these archaic ideas have been increasingly challenged, especially by urban educated women.

But two incidents show that India's very problematic relationship with menstruation continues. A vast majority of women, especially those from poor families, with no agency and no education, are forced to make choices that have long-term and irreversible impacts on their health and their lives.

The first incident was in the western state of Maharashtra where thousands of young women have undergone surgical procedures to remove their wombs in the past three years - in a substantial number of cases so that they can get work as sugarcane harvesters.

Every year, tens of thousands of poor families from Beed, Osmanabad, Sangli and Solapur districts migrate to more affluent western districts of the state - known as "the sugar belt" - to work for six months as "cutters" in sugarcane fields.

Once there, they are at the mercy of greedy contractors who use every opportunity

to exploit them.

To begin with, they are reluctant to hire women because cane-cutting is hard work and women may miss a day or two of work during their periods. If they do miss a day's work, they have to pay a penalty.

The living conditions at their work-place are far from ideal - the families have to live in huts or tents close to the fields, there are no toilets, and as harvesting is sometimes done even at night, there is no fixed time for sleeping or waking. And when women get their periods, it just becomes that much more tough for them. Because of the poor hygienic conditions, many women catch infections and, activists working in the region say, unscrupulous doctors encourage them to undergo unnecessary surgery even if they visit for a minor gynaecological problem which can be treated with medicine.

As most women in these areas are married young, many have two to three children by the time they are in their mid-20s, and because doctors don't tell them about the problems they would face if they underwent hysterectomy, many believe that it's okay to get rid of their wombs.

This has turned several villages in the region into "villages of womb-less women".



**Tens of thousands of women work as sugarcane harvesters in India**

After the issue was raised last month in the state assembly by legislator Neelam Gorhe, Maharashtra Health Minister Eknath Shinde admitted that there had been 4,605 hysterectomies just in Beed district in three years. But, he said, not all of them were carried out on women who worked as sugarcane harvesters. The minister said a committee had been set up to investigate several of the cases.

My BBC Marathi colleague Prajakta Dhulap, who visited Vanjarwadi village in Beed district, says from October to March every year, 80% of villagers migrate to work in

sugarcane fields and **half of the women in the village have had hysterectomies**-most are under 40 and some are still in their 20s.

Many of the women she met said their health had deteriorated since they underwent surgery. One woman talked about the "persistent pain in her back, neck and knee" and how she wakes up in the morning with "swollen hands, face and feet". Another complained of "constant dizziness" and how she was unable to walk even short distances. As a result, they both said they were no longer able to work in the fields.



'I will vote for someone who will guarantee proper wages'

The second piece of news is equally dire - it comes from the southern state of Tamil Nadu where **women working in the multi-billion dollar garment industry have alleged that they are given unlabelled drugs at work** - instead of a day off - when they complain of period pains.

According to a Thomson Reuters Foundation expose, based on interviews with about 100 women, the drugs were rarely provided by medical professionals and the seamstresses, mostly from poor disadvantaged families, said they couldn't afford to lose a day's wages on account of period pains.

All of the 100 women who were interviewed said they had received drugs, and more than half said that as a result, their health had suffered.

Most said they were not told the name of the drugs or warned about any possible side-effects.

Many of the women blamed these medicines for their health problems, ranging from depression and anxiety, to urinary tract infections, fibroids and miscarriages.

The reports have forced the authorities into action. The National Commission for Women has described the condition of the women in Maharashtra as "pathetic and miserable" and asked the state government to prevent such "atrocities" in future. In Tamil Nadu, the government said they would monitor the health of the garment workers.

The reports come at a time when attempts are being made across the world to increase women's participation in the workforce by implementing gender-sensitive policies.

Worryingly, female workforce participation in India has fallen from 36% in 2005-06 to 25.8% in 2015-16 and it's not hard to understand why if we look at the conditions in which women have to work.



PIYUSH NAGPAL

Tamil Nadu's multi-billion dollar garment industry employs 300,000 women

In Indonesia, Japan, South Korea and a few other countries, women are allowed a day off work during their periods. Many private companies also offer similar relief. "In India too, the Bihar state government has been allowing women employees to take two extra days off every month since as far back as 1992 and it seems to be working very well," says Urvashi Prasad, a public policy specialist at the Indian government think tank, Niti Aayog.

And last year, a female MP tabled a Menstrual Benefits Bill in the parliament, seeking two days off every month for every working woman in the country.

Ms Prasad says there are challenges to implementing any policy in a vast country like India, especially in the informal sector where it needs much more monitoring. But, she says, if a start is made in the formal sector, it can signal a change in mindsets and help remove the stigma that surrounds menstruation in India.

"So what we need is for the powerful organised private sector and the government to take a stand, we need people at the top to send the right signals," she says. "We have to start somewhere and eventually we can expect to see some change in the unorganised sector too."

The Menstrual Benefits Bill is a private member's bill so it's unlikely that it will come to much, but if it does become law, it would likely benefit the women who work in Tamil Nadu's garment factories which will have to implement it.

But such welfare measures rarely benefit those employed in India's vast unorganised sector, which means that women like those working in Maharashtra's sugarcane fields will remain at the mercy of their contractors.

## Why are Indian women 'Happy to Bleed'?

23 November 2015

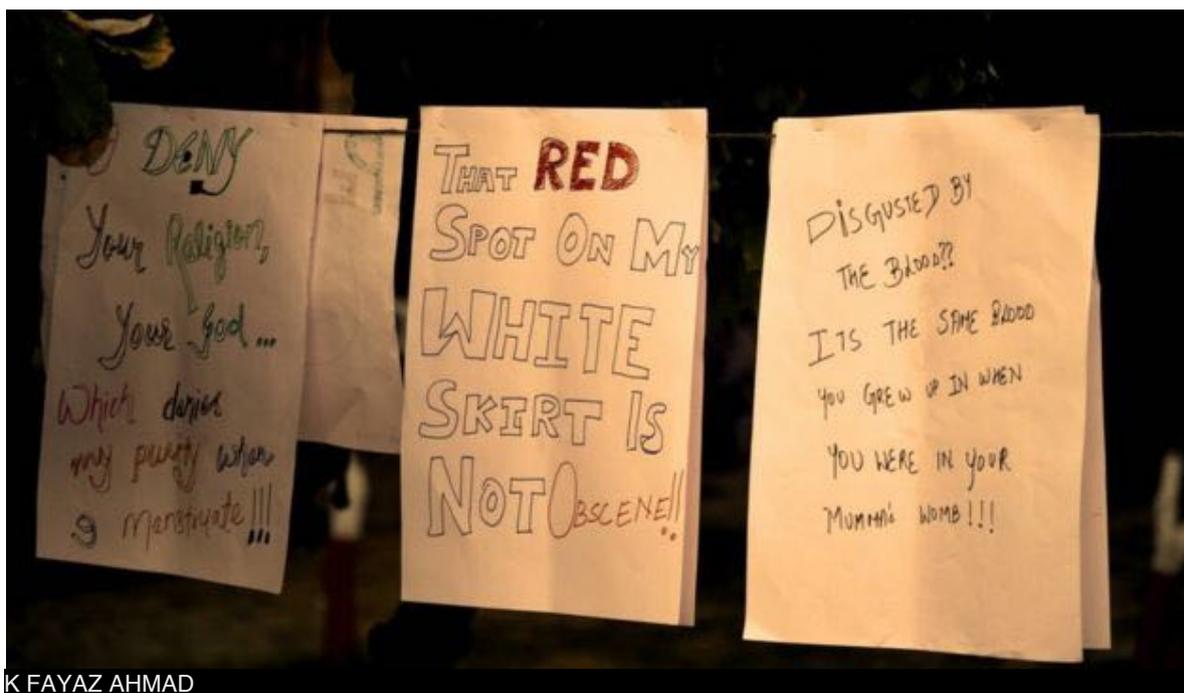


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**After an Indian temple chief recently said he would allow women to enter the shrine only after a machine was invented to detect if they were "pure" - meaning that they weren't menstruating - outraged women have launched a #HappyToBleed campaign on Facebook to protest against the "sexist statement", writes the BBC's Geeta Pandey in Delhi.**

Menstruation is generally a taboo topic in India, something that is rarely talked about openly.

But at the weekend, several photographs popped up on my Facebook page of young Indian women holding placards - some made up of sanitary napkins and tampons - with the slogan "Happy To Bleed".



A little bit of research led me to **this petition**, started by college student Nikita Azad, who was annoyed by the sexist remarks made by the head of the famous **Sabarimala temple in Kerala**.

"A time will come when people will ask if all women should be disallowed from entering the temple throughout the year," Prayar Gopalakrishnan, who recently took charge of the hilltop temple dedicated to Lord Ayyappa, **told reporters** earlier this month.

"These days there are machines that can scan bodies and check for weapons. There will be a day when a machine is invented to scan if it is the 'right time' for a woman to

enter the temple. When that machine is invented, we will talk about letting women inside," he added.



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Ms Azad insists that there is no "right time" to go into a temple and that women should have to right to go "wherever they want to and whenever they want to". The temple priest's comments, she says, reinforce misogyny and strengthen the myths that revolve around women, and that "Happy To Bleed" is a counter-campaign against menstrual taboos.

Hinduism regards menstruating women as unclean so, during her periods, a woman

is not allowed to enter the temple, touch any idols, enter the kitchen or even touch the pickle jar.



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Many Hindu temples in India - and also globally - have prominent notices displayed at the entrance telling menstruating women that they are not welcome, and many devout Hindu women voluntarily keep away from temples when they are menstruating.

But the Sabarimala bars all women in the reproductive age from entering the temple. The temple website explains that as Lord Ayyappa was "Nithya Brahmachari - or celibate - women between the 10-50 age group are not allowed to enter Sabarimala". The website adds, rather threateningly, that "such women who try to enter Sabarimala will be prevented by (the) authorities" from doing so.

Ms Azad says "we don't believe in religion that considers half the world impure" and that theirs is "not a temple-entry campaign" - it's "a protest against patriarchy and gender discriminatory practices prevalent in our society" and that they are fighting against sexism and age-old taboos.

Since its launch on Saturday, #HappyToBleed has received a lot of responses, especially from young urban Indian women.

"More than 100 women have posted their photographs on Facebook holding banners and placards, with catchy slogans, and many more have shared these photos on their timelines," Ms Azad told the BBC.



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The campaign has also been picked up by many people on Twitter who have written in with messages of support.

Some, however, have also wondered how women can be "happy" to bleed since periods can often be pretty painful.

"We are using happy as a word to express sarcasm - as a satire, to taunt the authorities, the patriarchal forces which attach impurity with menstruation," Ms Azad explains.

"It may be painful, but it's perfectly normal to bleed and it does not make me impure," she adds.